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FOOD AND COOKING DURING THE MAMLUK ERA

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Food has been a long-standing object of attention in ethnographic and sociological research. Among historians, too, leading members of the *Annales* School[1] pioneered attempts to develop a "total history" emphasizing the macro-historical analysis of societies over long periods and the study of all aspects of human experience, especially material culture. A salient example is Fernand Braudel's *Capitalism and Material Life*, 1400–1800 (1961, 1970), in which the author underscored the influence of long-term changes in material culture, including food, on social systems in Europe.

In the last decade, scholars studying the history of Islam have also begun to dwell on food in the study of the material culture. The collection *Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*, edited by Sami Zubaida and Richard Tapper (1994), examines Middle Eastern cuisine in the modern era, while studies by David Waines (*In a Caliph's Kitchen*, 1989), A.J. Arberry (*A Baghdad Cookery-Book*, 1993), and Manuela Marin ("Beyond Taste: The Complements of Colour and Smell in the Medieval Arab Culinary Tradition,"[2]) focus on the medieval period. Eliyahu Ashtor's "Essai sur l'alimantation des diverses classes social dans l'Orient medieval"[3] looks at social stratification in medieval Near Eastern populations by way of their patterns of food consumption.

The following pages will focus on aspects of food preparation and consumption in the Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517). Many features that were not specific to particular locales were common throughout the Muslim world, since ideas and practices related to food constituted a significant part of Islamic tradition and public knowledge.

The Kitchen

The preparation of food during the Mamluk era was clearly affected by social stratification, within both the ruling Mamluk elite and the general population. Only people of means could maintain kitchens in their homes, not only because of the great expense involved but also because of the danger entailed in keeping fire indoors, since no effective means were available to extinguish it. Sultan an-Nasir Muhammad (1310–1341) ordered that the vaults (*'uqud*) of the new kitchen in the Citadel of Cairo – the seat of the Mamluk Sultanate – be built of stone "for fear of conflagration" [*khawfan mina al-hariq*].[4] The government palaces in the citadel of Cairo, the adjacent palaces and homes of the Mamluk *amirs*, and those of the civilian elite all had running water, which allowed them to supply the needs of a kitchen and also served for purposes of hygiene and fire extinction. The fifteenth-century historian Khalil b. Shahin az-Zahiri attests that "the fire never goes out" in the sultan's kitchen.[5] To illustrate the vast wealth accumulated by vizier Majid Ibn Khasib



Brass bowl, inlaid with silver and gold, made by Ibn al-Zayn. Ca. 1290–1310. Louvre Museum, Paris.

(d. 1364) during his period of service, the historian Ahmad b. 'Ali al-Maqrizi (d. 1441) relates that large quantities of food were cooked "in his kitchen at home."[6]

Another difficulty in keeping a kitchen was the high cost of cooking utensils. The ownership of pots and their quality were symbols of social status. While the elite had kitchens equipped with "astounding utensils [*al-alat al-'ajiba*],"[7] the lower classes sometimes had to hire utensils in the market. Khalil b. Aybak as-Safadi (d. 1362), who compiled the biographical dictionary *al-Wafi bi'l-wafayat* during the reign of Sultan an-Nasir Muhammad (1310–1341), substantiated the miserliness of one of the prominent amirs, Baktamur al-Hajib (d. 1337), by noting that despite the latter's great wealth, he used to hire pots in the market.[8] During an-Nasir Muhammad's long stays at the home of Baktamur as-Saqi (d. 1332), another prominent *amir* of an-Nasir Muhammad, "he used to eat nothing but what the mother of Ahmad b. Baktamur cooked for him in silver pots."[9] When an-Nasir Muhammad himself prepared for the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, in 1321, the utensils taken along in his provisional kitchen included copper, silver and gold pots.[10]

The proportion of copper and silver utensils in the dowries of brides from among the civilian and Mamluk elites indicates that running a kitchen was integral to their lifestyle. Describing the market in Cairo for utensils inlaid with silver, al-Maqrizi relates: "the brides who were daughters of *amirs*, viziers, high clerks, and leading merchants used to include in their dowry ... seven *dikak:* one of silver, one of silver-inlaid copper, one of white copper ..."[11] (a *dikka* was a sort of wooden bedstead inset with ivory or ebony on which the bride's dowry was exhibited on the wedding day). The dowry of Baktamur as-Saqi's daughter was transferred by porters from her father's to her husband's residence. It included, among many other prestigious items, twenty-nine porter's loads of silver utensils and at least sixty-five loads of copper. The old silver utensils of Bint al-'Ama'im, daughter of a Cairo merchant, were inlaid with gold at a cost of 100,000 pure silver *dirhams.*[12]

In contrast with the elites, most of the lower social strata did not have their food prepared at home. At least in the first decades of the Mamluk sultanate, rank-and-file Mamluks in the sultan's service were provided with daily meals in the citadel, while those in the service of the amirs took their meals at their masters' tables. Sultan al-Mansur Qalawun (1279–1290) made frequent inspections of the food distributed to his Mamluks in order to ensure its excellence and nutritional quality.[13]

Members of the civilian middle class, those who earned a respectable living but were not well off, prepared their food at home in "kitchenettes." These were most likely without fire and running water, as borne out by evidence that the water was supplied by water vendors and the food sent to the market to be cooked, at the shop of the *shara'ihi* (the butcher), *at-tabbakh* (the cook), or *al-khabbaz* (the baker), who also baked bread that had been prepared at home. Muslim scholars gave special attention to the issue of who was to



Brass ewer, inlaid with silver, made by Husayn b. Muhammad al-Mawsili in Damascus for Sultan Salah al-Din Yusuf. Syria, 1258.
Louvre Museum, Paris.



Brass basin inlaid with silver and gold, made by Muhammad Ibn al-Zayn. Egypt, ca. 1290–1310. Louvre Museum, Paris.

bring the flour back from the miller or the bread and food to and from the market, indicating that in middle-class families it was the women who prepared the food at home. *Hisba* (the office of market, crafts and trades inspection) manuals explicitly instruct millers, bakers, cooks, and water carriers to employ professional women for this purpose or, when this was impossible, pious and trustworthy boys or chaste men (*mastur al-hal*). At least in Ibn al-Hajj's lifetime, people ignored these recommendations, and "unchaste," "impious" lads or even Jews and Christians were employed to take food from Muslim homes to the market and back.[14]

Those who belonged to the lower socioeconomic strata ate food that was prepared in the market by the *tabbakhun,* the cooks. Sources indicate that only the poor bought food prepared at the market: "and generally the butcher cooks for those whose earnings are not satisfactory."[15] This "take-away" food was sold in clay containers, while in the cooks' shops food was served in inexpensive clay utensils which often were not washed after use.[16] On the bottom rung of the social ladder were the urban indigents, who depended upon the mercy and charity of the owning classes.[17]

Kitchens, then, were a symbol of social status and resources. As such, they were often attached to religious institutions, such as mosques, *khanaqah* (Sufi dwellings and centers of spiritual activity), and *madrasa* (colleges of instruction in Islamic law), which were erected by the ruling groups and run by charitable endowments, *awqaf* (sing. *waqf*). These kitchens provided food and other commodities both to Muslim scholars and ascetics and to the needy urban populace. Sultan al-Zahir Baybars (1260–1276) established a khan (a hostel for Muslim travelers and pilgrims) northwest of Jerusalem whose facilities included a mill and a bakery that supplied food to guests.[18] The college-mosque an-Nasir Hasan, built between 1356 and 1359, had a kitchen attached to it which, according to the donor's deed, was to supply daily meals to the college's staff and the children residing in its orphanage. Every Thursday evening, the poor living in the vicinity were served a meal that included small, round loaves of bread, mutton, rice, and honey [19]

Amir Yashbak min Mahdi (d. 1480) established a *waqf* to support the operation of a kitchen for needy people living near the al-Azhar mosque, providing each diner with bread and a bowl of *qamhiyya,* a porridge made of milk, wheat and meat.[20] Meat, sweets, rice, and white bread were considered symbols of social status. The Mamluks fostered their image as public-spirited, devout Muslims by providing quality food items identified with the elite to the urban poor and to students and scholars of Islam, enhancing their prestige as holders of power and resources.

The Preparation of Food

The preparation of food was of interest mainly to the top echelon of the Mamluk ruling elite, to members of the civilian upper class who were able to cook food at home, and to the professional cooks who sold food to the vast urban lower classes. The attitude of the professional cooks toward food preparation was simple, pragmatic, and aimed at the maximization of profit. They used countless tricks to adulterate the food, while *muhtasibs,* market, crafts and trades inspectors, used counter-methods to expose their deceit. As a result, the quality of food prepared in the market, though it varied, was generally poor. Ways of adulterating meat dishes included the incorporation

of much fat and little meat; the replacement of mutton with goats' meat or with the meat of impure animals like dogs and cats – masked by the liberal use of spices; and the use of stale, cooked meat or carrion instead of fresh meat. *Mudira,* a sour milk soup sold by weight, was deviously made heavier by the addition of ground rice flour.[21]

Bread was often made of spoiled flour or adulterated by replacing the grain flour with ground peas, broad beans, or chick peas. Moreover, despite the strictures of the *muhtasibs,* bakery workers often kneaded the dough with dirty hands and feet or failed to wear garments with narrow sleeves and don head-bands and mufflers to stop their spittle from falling into the dough when they spoke or sneezed. Nor were instructions to prevent insects from creeping onto the bread always carried out. Ibn al-Hajj testifies that it was largely because of bakers' lack of compliance with *hisba* instructions that filth such as flies, straw, or hair was often found in commercially made bread.[22]

European pilgrims were puzzled by the daily habits they encountered in the Middle East. They found it unusual that cooked food was for sale in the markets and that men rather than women were the cooks. The Milanese Sancto Brasca, who visited Jerusalem in 1480, and Felix Faber, a Dominican from Switzerland who visited there in 1480 and 1483, concluded that, in the East, "no woman knows to bake a cake." Notwithstanding the *muhtasibs'* complaints, these two pilgrims expressed their admiration for the cleanliness of the open kitchens in the bazaars of Jerusalem.[23]



Brass bowl, inlaid with silver, gold, and a black compound. Egypt or Syria, 1346–7.
Louvre Museum, Paris.

Appreciation for fine food was a trait associated with the owning class, for whose members food and its consumption were features of social and cultural expression, and they went in for culinary adventures. Az-Zahiri enumerates at least forty-four dishes on the menu of the sultan's kitchen, some of which came in varying flavors.[24] To some of the elite, cooking was a hobby. The aforementioned vizier, Majid Ibn Khasib, owned seven hundred slave girls, two of whom were experts at preparing fried dishes. Sultan as-Salih Salih (1351–1354) was an amateur cook. He himself laid the table at a banquet he held in honor of his mother, Qutlubak, and he served her and other close associates dishes he had cooked "with his own hands."[25]

The banquet was a social event for the elite, decoding the shared status and cultural background of the participants. This was especially true when intellectuals were invited to keep company with the ruling elite. They were expected to display their adroitness at light, enjoyable conversation on various subjects, a genre defined in medieval Arabic literature as *adab.* Food was a theme in Mamluk *adab* literature. Famous poets of the period dedicated some of their verses to favorite dishes and the pleasures of consuming them. Well-known scholars, *'ulama',* did not refrain from writing on the mundane subject of alimentation, as illustrated by the anthology *Manhal al-lata'if fi al-kanafa wa'l-qata'if* (The spring of witticism concerning the *kinafa* [a pastry made of sweet vermicelli] and *qata'if* [sweetmeats]),[26] composed by the famous scholar and historian 'Abd ar-Rahman as-Suyuti (d. 1505). Since the *'ulama'* frequently took part in shared repasts within and outside their social circles, literature dealing with food purity and table manners was of special interest to them. For example, the historian Muhammad Ibn Tulun (d. 1546) wrote a treatise entitled *Dlalat ash-shakl 'ala kammiyyat al-akl* (A guide to determining the quantity of food that a person ought to consume).[27]

The Diet

Sociologists who have studied the diet of medieval western Europeans have shown that the higher their rank, the larger was the quantity of food they consumed and the greater the proportion of meat in their diet. Members of the lower strata, though they performed

hard manual labor, consumed smaller quantities of food and much less meat. Sources from the Mamluk period reveal a similar picture. The nutrition of the Egyptian rural masses in the Mamluk period was based mainly on locally available crops. Upper Egypt was abundant in sugar cane and dates, so its inhabitants lived mainly on sweet foodstuffs (*halawa*). In Lower Egypt, taro (colocasia, *qulqas*) and peas (*julaban*) were staples of nutrition. The diet of the peasantry was based mainly on bread: "And their *fallahin* have a kind of bread called *ka'k* made of wheat flour, and it is dried and constitutes the main part of their diet all year round."[28] Fish was also readily available, especially in the autumn, when the Nile tide brought this form of sustenance in large quantities. Fishing in this season was so easy that children could help provide food. Al-Maqrizi testifies that milk and milk products were also important ingredients in the diet of the masses, as they were in Western Europe in the same period.

Scarcity meant that the lower classes consumed small quantities of meat. Offal was the only type of meat generally associated with the food of the poor, probably because it could not be kept long. Offal and the heads of large and small cattle were disdained by the upper classes in Mamluk Egypt and treated as waste. The cook of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad, al-Hajj 'Ali, amassed great wealth from selling such waste products, accumulated in the sultan's kitchen and the homes of great *amirs* and officials during festive events. Al-Maqrizi reports that al-Hajj 'Ali frowned in response to the sultan's request that he cook an additional mutton dish at the end of the feast held when Amir Baktamur as-Saqi's son married the daughter of Amir Tankuz. When the Sultan asked him why, al-Hajj 'Ali told him that his request would deprive him of the 20,000 *dirhams* he could have made from selling the discarded cattle, chicken, and goose parts that he had accumulated during the celebration, which had to be sold immediately, before they spoiled. The Sultan dismissed him to prepare the dish, promising to reward him with an equal sum of money. On the Sultan's order, butchers and cooks from Cairo were brought to the Citadel, where they bought the waste products for 23,000 *dirhams.*[32]

In contrast to the common people's diet, meat and sweets were the mainstay of the upper classes. The annals of the Mamluk period are replete with information about the quantities they consumed. In the first decades of the Mamluk sultanate, it was considered necessary to provide rank-and-file Mamluks with a daily portion of meat: "and they had plenty of meat dishes, sweets, and fruits." During the reign of Sultan al-'Adil Kitbugha (1294–1296) the quantity of meat consumed daily in the sultan's household alone reached 25,000 *ratls,* while that served at the *simats,* the daily banquets an-Nasir Muhammad held for his amirs, reached 35,000 *ratls*, apart from poultry, lamb, kid, venison, and so on. At az-Zahir Baquq's *simat,* 5,000 *ratls* of meat were served, in addition to poultry. It was told of the vizier, Majid Ibn Khasib, that "he used to cook daily in his kitchen, at home, one thousand *ratls* of meat, apart from geese and poultry."[30]

As Eliyahu Ashtor has pointed out, meat and sugar were prestigious products in the Middle East throughout the Middle Ages. The prestige of meat and sweets was so augmented by their association with the upper classes that they were identified with the food of kings. According to al-Maqrizi, the provisions packed for the *hajj* of Sultan al-Ashraf Sha'ban (1376) included "kinds of royal foods" [*anwa' al-ma'akil al-mulukiyya*], such as the 30,000 boxes containing five *ratls* each of sweets made from refined sugar for the sultan's personal use. The endless quantities of sweets taken by the *amirs* and Mamluks on the *hajj* elicited the following comment from al-Maqrizi: "Consider the greatness of a country in which three hundred and sixty thousand *ratls* of sugar can be produced in one month for the sultan and his amirs, apart from [that produced] for others, which probably was of a similar volume."[31]

The special attention paid by the chroniclers of the Mamluk period to the varieties and quantities of meat and sweets consumed at the ruling elite's social events also attests to the value of these foodstuffs as signifiers of class status. Such occasions provided the upper classes with the opportunity to enhance their social position. Their excessive use of status symbols in these contested arenas was meant to convey the measure of their resources and power not only to the public, but also to the fellow members of their class. In 1293, Sultan al-Ashraf Khlil held a banquet to celebrate the dedication of the Ashrafiyya palace, the circumcision of his brother Muhammad (the future sultan an-Nasir Muhammad), and that of his nephew, Musa b. as-Salih. 3,000 sheep, 600

head of cattle, and 500 horses were slaughtered to prepare the meat dishes, while 1,800 *qintars* of sugar were used for the beverages and another 160 for the sweets. At the banquet held on the occasion of the marriage of Amir Qawsun to one of an-Nasir Muhammad's daughters, the refreshments included the meat of 5,000 sheep, 1,000 head of cattle, 50 horses, and great numbers of fowl and geese, together with sweets and beverages made from 11,000 *ablija*, cones, of sugar.[32]

The dedication of monumental religious edifices, under the patronage of Mamluk sultans and grand *amirs*, and the ceremonies held in those edifices to celebrate prophets' birthdays (*mawlid*, pl. *mawalid*) or religious festivals were occasions for dialogue between members of the ruling elite and their subordinates.[33] It was customary on the festivals of 'Id al-Fitr and 'Id al-Adha to serve sweet dishes and beverages. These refreshment had a double meaning; they were both a symbol of the prophet, who used to break the fast during Ramadan with a date or raisins, and a status symbol of the elite. The latter was also true of the meat distributed to officials, scholars and the masses in these institutions during Ramadan and 'Id al-Adha. Only the ruling groups could afford to give out meat in such large quantities.

Markers of inclusion and exclusion manifested at these religious feasts enhanced the hierarchical social structure that guaranteed the Mamluk ruling elite's political and social authority. Sultan az-Zahir Barquq held a special *simat* every day during 'Id el-fitr. When the ceremonies were over and the dignitaries had left, the servants and common people were allowed in to devour the remaining food.[34] The masses could cross social borders and fleetingly observe the lifestyle of the upper class only after the latter had left the scene, and only with their permission, thus reasserting their status as those in possession of power and authority.

Constructing institutions for the public, especially religiously oriented ones; outfitting them with status symbols of the ruling elite, such as a kitchen; and providing their subordinates with comestibles identified both with their prestigious diet and with Muslim tradition highlighted the rulers' image not only as benefactors but also as devout Muslims. By demonstrating their adherence to Islam in such a popular, mundane way, the Mamluk rulers fostered the impression that they well deserved their position.

1. An influential school of French historians formed around the journal *Annales: Économies, sociétés, civilisations*, which was founded by Lucian Febvre and Marc Bloch at the University of Strasbourg in 1929. Traian Stoianovich, *French Historical Method: The Annales Paradigm*, Ithaca–London 1976.
2. Manuela Marin, "Beyond Taste: The Complements of Colour and Smell in the Medieval Arab Culinary Tradition," in Sami Zubaida and Richard Tapper (eds.), *The Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*, London 1994.
3. Eliyahu Ashtor, "Essai sur l'alimantation des diverses classes social dans l'Orient medieval," *Annales*, 23 (1968), pp. 1017–1053.
4. Ahmad b. 'Ali al-Maqrizi, *Kitab al-Khitat wa'l-i'tibar fi dhikr al-khitat wa'l-athar*, Cairo 1987, II, p. 230.
5. Ghars ad-Din Khalil b. Shahin Az-Zahiri, *Zubdat kashf al-mamalik wa-bayan at-turuq wa'l-masalik*, ed. Paul Ravaisse, Paris 1894, p. 125.
6. Ahmad b. 'Ali Al-Maqrizi, *Kitab as-Suluk li-ma'rifat duwal al-muluk*, ed. Mustafa Ziyada and Sa'id 'Abd al-Fattah 'Ashur, Cairo 1930–1973, III, p. 59.
7. Az-Zahiri, *Zubda* (above, note 5), p. 125.
8. Khlil b. Aybak as-Safadi, *al-Wafi bi'l-wafayat*, ed. 'Ali Amara and Jacqueline Sublet, Wiesbaden 1980, X, p. 192.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
10. Jamal ad-Din Yusuf Abu al-Mahasin Ibn Taghri Birdi, *al-Nujum al-zahira fi muluk Misr wa'l-Qahira*, Cairo 1963–1972, IX, p. 58.
11. Al-Maqrizi, *Khitat* (above, note 4), II, p. 105.
12. As-Safadi, *al-Wafi* (above, note 8), X, p. 197; al-Maqrizi, *Khitat* (above, note 4), II, p. 105.
13. Al-Maqrizi, *Khitat* (above, note 4), II, pp. 213, 214.

14. Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Qurashi Ibn al-Ukhuwwa, *Ma'alim al-qurba fi ahkam al-hisba*, ed. Reuben Levy, Cambridge, 1938, p. 90; Muhammad b. Muhammad Ibn al-Hajj, *al-Madkhal*, Cairo, 1960, IV, pp. 174, 180, 181.
15. Ibn al-Ukhuwwa, *Ma'alim al-Qurba* (abobe, note 14), p. 109.
16. Ibn Bassam al-Muhtasib, *Nihayat al-rutba fi talab al-hisba*, ed. Husam ad-Din as-Samra'i, Bagdad 1968, p. 40; al-Maqrizi, *Khitat* (above, note 4), II, pp. 95, 105.
17. Ibn al-Hajj, *al-Madkhal* (above, note 14), IV, p. 188.
18. Mujir ad-Din al-Hanbali, *al-Uns al-jalil bi-ta'rikh al-Quds wa'l-Khalil*, Amman 1973, II, p. 87.
19. Muhammad Muhammad Amin, *al-Awqaf wa'l-hayat al-ijtima'iyya fi Misr 648–923/1250–1517*, Cairo 1980, p. 137.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
21. Ibn al-Hajj, *al-Madkhal* (above, note 14), IV, p. 199.
22. *Ibid.*, IV, pp. 182–184; Ibn Bassam al-Muhtasib, *Nihayat* (above, note 16), p. 21; Ibn al-Ukhuwwa, *Ma'alim al-qurba* (above, note 14), p. 91.
23. Sylvia Schein, "From 'Holy Geography' to 'Ethnography': 'Otherness' in Pilgrims' Descriptions of the Holy Land in the Middle Ages," in I. Zinger (ed.), *Miroirs de l'alterite et voyages au Proche-Orient*, Geneva 1991, p. 119.
24. Az-Zahiri, *Zubda* (above, note 5), p.125; al-Maqrizi, *Suluk* (above, note 6), II, p. 535; as-Safadi, *al-Wafi* (above, note 8), IV, p. 37.
25. Al-Maqrizi, *Suluk* (above, note 6), II, p. 929; III, p. 59.
26. Jalal ad-Din 'Abd ar-Rahman as-Suyuti, *Manhal al-lata'if al-kinafa wa'l-qata'if,* ed. Mahmud Nassar, Cairo 1994.
27. Muhammad b. 'Ali Ibn Tulun, *Dalalat ash-shakl 'ala kammiyyat al-akl*, ed. Muhammad Khayr Ramadan Yusuf, Beirut 1998.
28. Al-Maqrizi, *Khitat* (above, note 4), I, pp. 45, 46, 64, 71, and 108; Ibrahim b. Muhammad Ibn Duqmq, *Kitab al-intisar li-wasitat 'aqd al-amsar*, Beirut 1983, pp. 41–46. See also Ashtor, "Essai" (above, note 3), pp. 1029–1030.
29. Al-Maqrizi, *Khitat* (above note 4), II, pp. 231 and 315; *Suluk* (above, note 6), II, p. 686.
30. Idem, *Khitat* (above, note 4), II, p. 210 and 213; *Suluk* (above, note 6), III, p. 59. *A ratl* or *ritl* was equivalent to about 447 g in Egypt.
31. Idem, *Suluk* (above, note 6), III, p. 273.
32. Idem, *Khitat* (above, note 4), II, pp. 112 and 211; *Suluk* (above, note 6), II, p. 288. A *qintar* equalled 100 *ratls* – that is, about 44.7 kg – in Cairo.
33. For examples see al-Maqrizi, *Khitat* (above, note 4), II, pp. 229 and 330; *Suluk* (above, note 6), III, pp. 28, 199, 403, and 547; IV, pp. 337, 508.
34. Al-Maqrizi, *Khitat* (above, note 4), II, p. 210. For further examples see *ibid.*, p. 330; and *Suluk* (above, note 6), II, p. 807.